

Town of Bradley Beach
(Town of Ocean Park)
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Intersection of State Route Nos. 71 and 33
Bradley Beach
Monmouth County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1008

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF BRADLEY BEACH (Town of Ocean Park)

HABS No. NJ-1008

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Intersection of State Route Nos. 71 and 33, Bradley Beach, Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Significance: Bradley Beach was conceived in the 1870s by James A. Bradley who hoped to extend the temperance and religious conviction found in Ocean Grove directly to the north. Although Bradley's religious ideals never took hold, the resort did develop into a democratic family-style community--an alternative to the nearby elite resorts such as Deal or Allenhurst.

History: Although Bradley Beach, originally named Ocean Park, did not succeed as the religious resort James Bradley had envisioned, his influence within the community continued, and it was renamed in his honor. A souvenir booklet, published by the borough in 1913, when Bradley was still alive, announced:

no man has done more to develop the New Jersey coast and make it a paradise, and given his life service for others than Mr. Bradley, and as the shadows lengthen and as the mellow glow of the setting of life's sun rests softly upon him, may he behold the rays of the rising sun of righteousness, and be greeted with an abundant entrance into the eternal city.¹

The righteous "City Beautiful" Bradley envisioned for Bradley Beach,² influenced by the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, never quite took shape. At the request of citizens, a municipality was created in 1892, enlarged in 1908 to seven-tenths of a square mile to include the area south to Sylvan Lake.³ A number of rambling, wood-frame Victorian hotels, such as the Hotel La Reine, appeared as the grid pattern of building lots were sold off. But the peculiar combination of hotels, the awning-shaded cottages of Fifth Avenue, the one-story basement-less camps, such as those on Ocean Avenue, incongruously plunked down on choice Atlantic-fronting lots, created a village hardly as homogeneous as Ocean Grove. This quality made Bradley Beach seem at once more democratic and chaotic, a character that survives today in a mixture of buildings and changes reflecting a more human, secular culture.

Beyond architecture, the mentality of Bradley Beach differs from Ocean Grove. Early postcards of Bradley Beach offered what were, racy images, such as one with a man reading his lover's palm under the caption, "Reading the Future in Bradley Beach,

¹ Frank Scott York, "The Honorable James A. Bradley," 75th Diamond Jubilee: Boro of Bradley Beach New Jersey (Bradley Beach, NJ: Board of Commissioners, 1968), np.

² York.

³ "History of Bradley Beach," 75th Diamond Jubilee, np.

N.J."⁴ This century, a down-to-earth frankness was revealed by a Bradley Beach newspaper columnist who reflected, for the benefit of returning tourists:

welcome back to the Jersey Shore. We've missed you. The clamming, fishing, swimming goes on after you've left us, but you lend a certain something that we miss when you're not around. For want of a better name, let's call it money.⁵

In Bradley Beach you could drive or swim on Sundays, drink beer, youths could hold hands on the boardwalk and, one imagines, show a bit more skin in the surf. More tolerant and, it still seems to some, kinder, Bradley Beach was proud to claim itself a "cross section" of America⁶ and make uncommonly few claims with snooty pretense. Famous as "the first resort in the country to charge admission to fenced-in public beaches," Bradley Beach makes a business of its location.⁷

Today, virtually all of the great hotels are gone, and the streets are an incongruous sometimes jolting mixture of structures and shapes from every era. Ocean Grovers refer to the application of aluminum siding and replacement windows to Victorian cottages as "Bradley Beaching,"⁸ and indeed such changes have scarred much of the latter town's already mish-mash architecture. Neither design control nor peer pressure intervened to prevent the 1991 encasing of the Victorian cottage at Newcrest and Beach avenues in vinyl siding. On Ocean Avenue a group of crumbling, 1920s stucco Spanish Revival, one-story cottages, stand for sale, overshadowed and separated by a tall, new condominium. Across the street visitors play miniature golf along the boardwalk, which serves as a community promenade despite the lack of amusements. Local bands frequently offer evening classical music concerts from a boardwalk bandstand. On Tuesday nights the lights of a local church illuminate the weekly Bingo game.

Among significant buildings remaining are the boarded up 1912 railroad station on Main Street along the still-active New Jersey Transit Coast Line, a shingled mansion on Ocean Avenue, and the First Methodist Episcopal Church, at Madison and La Reine Avenues, which was built in 1900 from donations, including \$300 from James Bradley.⁹ Along Main Street, Route 71, which connects with the main streets of

⁴ "Reading the Future in Bradley Beach N.J." postcard (New Jersey Collection, Monmouth College Library, Long Branch NJ, ND).

⁵ York, "Hello, Summer Folks!," 75th Diamond Jubilee.

⁶ "Dear Friends," letter signed by Bradley Beach Board of Commissioners, in 75th Diamond Jubilee, np.

⁷ Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, New Jersey: A Guide to its Present and Past (New York: Public Library of Newark and New Jersey Guild Associates, Viking Press, 1939), 683.

⁸ Meeting of Ocean Grove Historical Society, (Attended by Author, Aug., 1991).

⁹ "First Methodist Church," 75th Diamond Jubilee, np.

Avon-by-the-Sea and Ocean Grove, is Bradley Beach's central business district, which has maintained its original trolley-era scale. Other historic sites include the pavement at the foot of Brinley Avenue where, legend has it, the famous pirate Captain Kidd buried treasure which has yet to be found:

perhaps the sea itself has claimed the gold pieces. Perhaps the treasure never existed except in the imagination of historians. And perhaps, as we would most like to believe, the Captain's booty lies deep and undisturbed under the sands where, today, bathers play their transistor radios and consume chicken-salad sandwiches on long, hot summer days.¹⁰

A current guidebook describes Bradley Beach. "Many visitors to the North Jersey Shore drive right through Bradley Beach. It isn't difficult to do."¹¹ A closer look reveals a varied architecture and culture that, more than other shore towns, mirrors mainstream American life in the twentieth century.

Prepared by: Alfred Holden
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- Sources:
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¹⁰ "Captain Kidd's Treasure," 75th Diamond Jubilee, np.

¹¹ Robert Santelli, The Jersey Shore: A Travel and Pleasure Guide (Charlotte, NC: Fast & McMillan Publishers, 1986), 46.

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Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatz (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.